

# Hearing Footsteps in the Dark: African American Students' Descriptions of Effective Teachers

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There has been scant research examining African American students' perceptions of their learning environments. Nonetheless, the persistent underachievement of African American students merits an investigation into their viewpoints as to what types of teaching and learning environments promote high achievement. In this article, I detail findings from a qualitative case study that examined African American elementary and secondary students' descriptions of teaching practices and learning environments within urban contexts. The student interpretations identified 3 central teaching strategies that had a positive affect on student effort, engagement in class content, and overall achievement. The 3 key strategies were (a) teachers who establish family, community, and home-like characteristics; (b) teachers who establish culturally connected caring relationships with students; and (c) the use of certain types of verbal communication and affirmation.

The academic achievement data for African American students' performance in U.S. schools paints a bleak picture of their performance. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from 1994, 1996, and 1998 reveals persistent underachievement in critical subject matter areas such as reading, math, and science. Some scholars have suggested that the academic difficulty many African American students experience manifests itself in a plethora of behavioral and social maladjustments (Kohl, 1999). For example, although African American students make up approximately 16.2% of the entire K-12 school population, they constitute nearly 30% of all special education students (Patterson, 1997). Furthermore, as

overrepresented as African American students are in special education, they are equally underrepresented in the gifted education population. Ford and Harris (1999) reported that many school districts have perennial underrepresentation of minority and low socioeconomic students in gifted education. They contend that the underrepresentation for African American students is most extreme in the case of African American males, who are least likely to be identified as gifted. The unfortunate tragedy regarding the academic and social underachievement of African American students is that it has occurred amidst a myriad of research that has examined various factors involved in their educative process. Thus, while important research has examined critical variables in the educational achievement of African American student progress, many researchers ponder why the underachievement still remains.

This article examines an area that has received scant attention in the professional literature; African American students' perceptions of their learning environments. An increasing number of studies have attempted to examine student perspectives of effective teaching and classroom climates (Labonty & Danielson, 1988; Miron & Lauria, 1998); however, the need for additional descriptions of students' perspectives remains. This article highlights the findings from a 2-year study of elementary and secondary African American students located in urban schools and their perceptions and interpretations of what characteristics constitute effective teaching. The purpose of the study was to uncover African American students' perceptions of their teachers' pedagogical practices, and to find out to what degree the students believed their academic and social achievement was influenced by teacher pedagogy. The examination of students' descriptions of effective teachers emerged from the need to examine viewpoints from a source that is rarely heard in the discussion of school reform for African American students—the students themselves. The inquiry into students' perceptions of effective research teaching warrants examination due to the invisible status that many marginalized students have in the discourse on school reform (Fine, 1987; Nieto, 1992; Weiss & Fine, 1993). Moreover, this investigation attempts to offset the silencing of student voices from this school reform debate, which consequently has resulted in countless misguided theories, programs, and practices. Consequently, misguided interventions have contributed to further resistance and alienation in the classroom and disenfranchisement from the educational process for many nonmainstream students (Lee, 1999; Miron & Lauria, 1998).

Previous research has claimed that the discussion on school reform for academically and socially marginalized students has included perspectives from countless vantage points. Yet a number of theorists have argued that research has inexplicably excluded the voices of students, while maintaining a consistent account from other resources involved in the schooling process for culturally diverse students (Nieto, 1994; Waxman, 1989). The shortcomings of numerous interventions and misguided practices merit the creation of a space for students to offer potential so-

lutions for what they believe works best for them. Thus, there is a need to empower students by placing their voices at the center of the discussion of school reform. The title of this article, "Hearing Footsteps in the Dark," represents sounds that are being heard from a place where no one wants to go. As a father of a 4-year-old who frequently disdains entering dark rooms because of the footsteps he allegedly hears, my son often tells me, "I hear footsteps in the dark, but I don't want to go in there to find out what it is." The dismal performance of many African American students should enlighten educators to the fact that these footsteps we hear are trying to tell us something that we have yet to hear, or perhaps as my son would say, that we don't want to know. Unfortunately many African American students have attempted to let us know what we cannot quite see. Many have expressed their displeasure with schools in ways that have only resulted in their further alienation, in the form of academic underachievement, school suspension and expulsion, and myriad other implicit and explicit punitive actions. Persistent underachievement and social disenfranchisement may very well represent a plea for help, or a cry for intervention that has fallen on deaf ears. Educators must begin to listen to the "footsteps in the dark" and perhaps shed light on what plagues far too many African American students. It is critical that pleas such as these be given greater attention from educators if more viable solutions are to be discovered.

### STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL: WHY IT MATTERS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The research on marginalized students' perceptions of their teachers' pedagogical practices has been minimal at best. Though the research has been limited, the literature available both sheds valuable insights into how students perceive schools and merits further analysis of capturing these accounts of school. In a review of the research on instructional practices of teachers of African American students, Waxman and Huang (1997) contended that little research has examined students' perceptions of instructional practices and overall classroom environments. They hypothesized that understanding how students perceive and react to their learning environment may be more useful than the opinion of outsiders who observe and assess the quality of teaching behaviors. Waxman (1989) posited that it is important for researchers to analyze student perspectives of classroom instruction and learning environments because students ultimately respond to what is important. Moreover, the environment that students experience may be quite different from observed or intended pedagogy (Waxman, 1989; Wittrock, 1986). Nieto (1994) extended the call for more students' perspectives of their learning environments by stating that "student voices sometimes reveal the great challenges and even the deep pain young people feel when schools are unresponsive, cold places." She continues by stating that "those who spend the most time in schools and classrooms are

often given the least opportunity to talk ... students have important lessons to teach educators and we need to begin to listen to them more carefully" (p. 420).

The literature on students' perspectives has also shed light on the importance of providing a voice to students who have not experienced school success. For example, Giroux (1988) stated that students' viewpoints of their classroom environments provide two important perspectives. They provide (a) insights into important components of the teaching and learning process, and (b) "an important starting point for enabling those who have been silenced or marginalized by the schools ... to reclaim the authorship of their own lives" (p. 63). In a study conducted by Hollins and Spencer (1990), in which African American elementary and secondary students talked about their views of school, three key themes emerged: The students stated that (a) relationships between teachers and students affected academic achievement, (b) teachers' responsiveness to students' personal lives generated positive feelings that led to increased effort in school, and (c) students expressed a preference for teachers who enabled them to actualize their own ideas in completing assignments and becoming engaged in class discussions.

In a study assessing African American and Latino first- and third-grade students' perceptions of school climate, Slaughter-Defoe and Carlson (1996) discovered the important role that teachers play in students' perceptions. Their findings revealed that interactive teacher-child relations are the most important dimension of school climate for African American students. The students stated that teachers who cared for them, made themselves available to comfort them, and were concerned with helping them deal with their school and personal problems made a difference in the schooling experience.

### RACE, RESISTANCE, AND POWER: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

More recent studies have revealed students' understanding of more complex factors influencing their learning environments. Issues such as race, resistance, and power have become more pervasive as students have articulated their views of schooling. Lee's (1999) ethnographic study with low achieving urban high school students identified three specific structures and practices that contributed to their underachievement. African American and Latino students contended that contributing factors to their failure in school were (a) teacher-centered classrooms, (b) perceived racism and discrimination toward students in interactional patterns and expectations, and (c) lack of personal teacher-student relationships as reflected in lack of caring and overall teacher apathy.

A number of scholars have documented students' accounts of the increasing role that racism plays in their school achievement. Miron and Lauria (1998) discovered in their research that, for many African American students, resistance as a

form of disapproval of White hegemony was a common practice. Quoting from an African American student, "They [teachers] expect more from Vietnamese kids that always [are] smarter and stuff ... they never expect a black student to be smarter than a Vietnamese, you know. They always automatically think that we're dumber" (p. 200). The students mentioned teachers' lack of caring, negative "gossip" about African American students, and failure to show concern for student academic success as contributing factors of their poor performance.

Students' perceptions of their schooling environment also suggest that teacher attitudes have a significant effect on the way students perceive their school experience. Phelan, Yu, and Davidson (1994) examined the pressures and problems that students perceive to have an impact on their school and learning endeavors. In a 2-year study with ethnically and academically diverse high school students, the students were revealed to be having difficulty with course content when teaching styles were boring and did not take advantage of students' strengths. Moreover, the students stated that they felt as though they were often singled out or "picked on" solely because of their ethnic background or cultural norms and beliefs. For many students, their ways of responding to these noncaring environments were to refer to alternative means of coping, such as copying other students' work, creating disruptions in class, or withdrawing quietly from the class. Conversely, the students stated that teachers who had a positive impact on their learning frequently encouraged them and provided personalized attention when they began experiencing academic difficulties.

## METHOD

The students who participated in the study were chosen from five urban elementary and secondary schools located in the northwestern and midwestern areas of the United States. The students ranged from second to eighth grades. A purposeful sample of 30 students was used for the study, 17 girls and 13 boys. A cross-selection of students, based on academic achievement and classroom behavior per their teachers' classifications, were identified to serve as participants for the study. Thus, the students fell into low-, medium-, or high-achievement and behavioral categories. This choice of selection was also made to reduce the likelihood that students would give glowing testimonials of their teachers that may not have been indicative of their true perceptions of their learning environments.

Data collection occurred during the 1998–1999 school year. Semi-structured interviews were done with the students to gain insight into their perceptions of school in general, and of their teachers' pedagogy as it related to degrees of effectiveness or ineffectiveness. Each student was interviewed once individually and once in a group setting of two to three with selected classmates who were also participants in the study. The interviews, which occurred on the students' school premises, lasted ap-

proximately 30 to 60 min each, and were tape-recorded and transcribed. Data-collection methods also included classroom observations that occurred two to three times a week, and lasted from 30 to 90 min per visit. The purpose of the observations was to compare the students' interview responses with their classroom performance, engagement, and achievement. All data were also analyzed using a constant comparative method from an interpretivist stance (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; LeCompte & Preissle, 1982). An interpretivist framework highlights the importance of context and the multiple ways in which individuals construct meaning. All data were also analyzed using a constant comparative method (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982) that assumes that data collection and analysis are recursive, one informing the other throughout the course of the study. Data from the interviews and observations were triangulated to cross-check themes and patterns emerging from the data. The ability to generalize the findings from these data to a larger population can be identified as a limitation of the study. This limitation is a result of the sample size of the study and the perceptions of the students being limited exclusively to their viewpoints of school and their teachers' pedagogy. Nonetheless, I do not feel the limitations of the study undermine the implications of this work. Maxwell (1992) stated that internal generalization is important for most qualitative researchers, and that the "value of a qualitative study may depend on its lack of external generalizability" (p. 274).

The teachers whom the students describe in the study each brought different philosophical approaches to their teaching. Though they are not the unit of analysis for this article, a brief background description of each may provide greater contextual clarification. Vann Jones (all teachers' and students' names used are pseudonyms) is an African American male with 7 years of middle school teaching experience. He is currently in his 4th year of teaching eighth-grade U.S. History and government at the Malcolm X Cultural Academy, a charter school designed to incorporate African American cultural heritage into school curriculum. Affectionately referred to as "Baba Jones" by his students, Vann, a 29-year-old Gulf War veteran, has spoken of his call to education and teaching as a mission to save lives, and he frequently informs his pedagogy in a sociopolitical manner that seeks to develop critical consciousness among his students.

Hazel Russell is an African American fifth-grade teacher. She has taught at South Side Elementary School for 10 years, and is a former recipient of the Karen Karsome Award for the 7th Congressional District Excellence in Education Project. This award is given to persons nominated by their colleagues for their leadership, contributions, and commitment to education. It is the second-highest-rated teacher award in the state.

Louise Herman is an African American woman and a fourth-grade teacher. A Haitian immigrant and former corporate attorney, she sought to become a teacher after feeling unfulfilled in the legal profession, where she felt that work did little to make a difference in the lives of young people.

Dorothy Kelly is an African American woman and fourth-grade teacher who has taught for the past 20 years. Influenced by her mom, who taught in public schools for more than 40 years, Dorothy began her career as a special education teacher, teaching neurologically impaired, learning disabled, and severely behaviorally handicapped students, most of whom were African American. Her steadfast belief that many African American students were being misdiagnosed as students with special needs led her to become a teacher in a traditional classroom to better meet the academic and social needs of African American students.

Marilyn Smith is an African American woman. She has been a teacher for the past 15 years, 6 of which were at Central Elementary School, where she has taught second grade. After teaching for more than 10 years in suburban schools where she rarely taught African American students, Marilyn came to Central primarily for the opportunity to teach African American students whom she feels often do not get the type of academic challenges and cultural nurturing they need for school success.

Three central themes emerged from the interview data with students on what types of teachers and teaching styles promoted their academic achievement: (a) the presence of family, community, and home characteristics; (b) culturally connected caring; and (c) verbal communication and affirmation. Each of these broad themes encompasses different features. I will describe these themes and provide student data to illustrate student perceptions of their teachers' instructional practices and classroom environment.

### FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND HOME CHARACTERISTICS: "MAKING SCHOOL SEEM LIKE HOME"

One of the most frequently mentioned practices by the students about their teachers' effectiveness was their teachers' ability to structure their classrooms in a manner that mirrored family and community practices, beliefs, and values, or, in one student's words, to "make school seem like home." A number of the students commented on various aspects of their classroom environments that made them feel like family. Promoting bonding through building a community-type atmosphere among students is a useful strategy for developing effective connections (Corey & Corey, 1987; Deiro, 1994; Peck, 1987). By reflecting on common interests, histories, backgrounds, and experiences, students are able to come together because of their similarities, which is the basis on which social relationships develop (Heller, 1989).

One of the methods each of the teachers used to build community was through the use of daily rituals and classroom traditions. In Dorothy Kelly's fourth-grade classrooms, the students participated in a daily activity called "Morning Circle," wherein they shared events, issues, and people in their lives with their teacher and classmates. A student in Dorothy's classroom talked about why Morning Circle was important to her:

I like it [Morning Circle] because it's the only time you get to sit and talk with your friends besides lunch and recess ... It's the beginning of the day and we're all really excited and we want to start a whole new day and explore things. It's just a good way to begin a new day.

Another student in Dorothy's class stated that she enjoyed the poems that were recited at the end of the Morning Circle. She commented,

It's like a beginning of a new day when we have Morning Circle and when we say [the poem] "*Welcome to Success*." [To me] it means we are in a place to do our best. It's saying we'll all do our best in class and succeed ... and I feel that we all will be learning something today.

Providing rituals and traditions has been a common strategy used to form bonds between individuals and their families, communities, and institutions (Deiro, 1994). These activities provide students with a common basis and familiar routine. Louise tried to build family and community in her classroom by drawing from the cultural values she practiced during her upbringing in Haiti. In explaining why she did this, she stated,

I do it [establish community and family] with the idea of "shaming" or bringing shame onto the family. It's a very cultural thing. Because I grew up knowing that I should not do anything to bring shame to my family, especially in my family. We had severe consequences for doing it [shaming] ... So I talk to the kids about shaming our family, shaming themselves, or shaming me ... It's not unusual for the kids to come in and say "Oh, Ms. Herman, we didn't shame you" or "Ms. Herman, we shamed you." It's a sense of pride inside of them.

Each of the students interviewed from Louise's class emphasized the importance of not "shaming" themselves or their teacher. They talked about how important it was to leave a good impression with others. One of the students felt shaming his teacher was the worst thing the class could do. In making his point, he said,

I remember one day we had a sub [substitute teacher] and we were acting real bad and she left Ms. Herman a note telling her how we acted ... [the next day] Ms. Herman was mad, and the first thing she said was, "You all have shamed me," and I knew we were in trouble. It's almost like messing up your family name.

Several of Louise's students mentioned how she stressed the importance of them being held accountable for their own actions. In addition, a number of students recalled how she repeatedly told them how their actions, bad or good, could be perceived by others as a reflection of their teacher, classmates, school, family,



or racial group. As one student stated “It’ll make her [Louise] look bad, whenever we act up, so we better not shame her.” Another student talked about the importance of students being on their best behavior: “We have a reputation being in Room 7, and all of the other teachers know that we’re in Ms. Herman’s class, and if we do something wrong Ms. Herman will be upset with us for shaming her.”

Several of the students commented that they were fond of their teachers because of the ways they resembled mothers or other family members. The students talked about how certain mannerisms, modes of interactions, and phrases were identical to the types of interactions that they experienced at home. The interactions between African American children and adults can be unique encounters, which can include a range of exchanges from sarcasm, anger, and resentment to joking, support, and encouragement. The teachers in this study used a range of emotional exchanges to motivate students to do their best. Hazel frequently used sarcasm to give messages to her students, as illustrated in the following scenario, in which she requested a book report from a student:

- Hazel [speaking to student]: Where’s your book report?  
 Student: I don’t have it. (long pause) I didn’t finish it.  
 Hazel: You didn’t finish it? (with emphasis) What are you waiting for to get it done? Christmas?  
 Student: No.  
 Hazel: Alright then, get it done!

In many instances, sarcasm or approval was replaced with anger and disappointment when students did not complete assignments, return homework, or address the teacher in a respectful manner. At times, the verbal exchanges appeared to be abrasive and harsh for elementary students. However, the students in these classrooms seemed to know the parameters and purposes of the exchanges and the messages they carried. As I spoke to students across each of the classes they repeatedly stated that their teachers’ stern and strict methods of interactions often were done in a manner to get them to put forth their best effort.

According to several students in her classroom, Hazel’s method of interaction is reminiscent of how their parents or other family members address them. Because of the familiarity with such interactions, most of the students appeared to be quite comfortable with these types of interactions with their teachers. Some of the students’ comments underscore this point. One fifth-grader explained,

She’s [Hazel] just like my mom. I can’t even say anything without her telling me “don’t argue,” “don’t lie to me.” My mom, she’s just like that. Somebody asks her a question and she’s gonna make a long lecture that’s about 20 times as long, and nobody wants to hear it.

Another student noted the same type of similarities between her teacher and a family member she lives with. She explained,

She [Hazel] reminds me of my Aunt Toni with the lecture thingy yeah ... you know, get good grades, do good in school, and all that kinda stuff. Sometimes I think "just leave, or do something." Man, she gets on my nerves. It's funny how two people can be so much alike. But, I'd rather have someone like her [Hazel] than somebody who doesn't understand me and where I come from.

The teacher–student exchanges in Hazel's class were built on student accountability, respect, and direct responses to questions asked. Students were given expectations and were required to follow through on various tasks. Establishing home and community-like atmospheres were explicit teaching strategies used to build relationships among the students. The relationships the students spoke highly of were preferred because they built on students' prior knowledge as it relates to communication, various behaviors, adult expectations, and displays of concern.

### CULTURALLY CONNECTED CARING

The data from the study offered a number of insights into how African American students defined effective teaching. Many of the descriptions offered by the students framed effective teaching in a sociocultural manner that stressed the fluidity of home-to-school characteristics. One of the more frequently mentioned features was the notion of caring, or what is referred to as "culturally connected caring." Culturally connected caring refers to a display of caring that occurs within a cultural context with which students are familiar. Behavioral expectations, nurturing patterns, and forms of affection take place in a manner that does not require students to abandon their cultural integrity. Deiro (1994) called this form of teaching caring and openness "effective connection" with students. In my observations of Dorothy, culturally connected caring took the form of warm pats on the back to encourage students to do their best, verbally expressed high expectations for performance, and direct statements about how she felt about the students' academic potential. Gregory, a student in her class, commented about these gestures:

She is a good teacher because she cares so much about us. She tells us every-day [that] she cares, and she puts a lot more effort into the kids who don't want to do it [learn]. She tries to help everybody. She tries to make sure kids get the right idea of what they should be learning. Because a teacher who cares makes sure that the kids learn instead of going to school to play, and school is supposed to be about learning.

A number of the middle school students talked about their admiration for Vann because of the types of relationships that he formed with students, which they have found to be uncommon in middle school. TyShawn, an eighth-grade student in one of Vann's classes, expressed his sentiments with the following comment:

You can tell Baba Jones cares because he does stuff that our other teachers don't. He asks us about stuff that's going on at home, things we like and don't like. He does a lot of the things that elementary teachers used to do to get to know their students. And because he cares so much, all the students like him and want to do good work in his class.

A comment such as TyShawn's may hold important value for many secondary teachers struggling to educate African American students. While the demands of secondary teachers' schedules and larger number of students definitely prohibit certain types of practices used by elementary teachers, the needs of students do not diminish. Thus, TyShawn's comments should inform secondary teachers of the need for some students to have personal connections with their teachers. These connections may mean understanding issues outside of school that students frequently confront, increased awareness of family circumstances, or perhaps a general curiosity about students' interests and desires.

Several of the students in Louise's fifth-grade class stated that their teacher showed how much she cared about her students because of the range of emotions she displayed. One student repeatedly stated that he could tell whether a teacher cared about the students in the class based on how emotional he or she is about education and noneducation topics. The students talked about how Louise would exhibit a range of emotions when it came to her approval or disapproval of students' academic performance. Gregory, a student in her class, offered the following comment:

Whenever we do something that really makes her proud of us, she will tell us how happy and proud she is of us, and sometimes she even starts to cry. I remember the first time she did that [cried], I was like "Man, Ms. Herman really cares about us if she starts crying when we do good." I have never had a teacher that would cry in front of her kids [students]. After seeing that [the crying], I think a lot of us [the students] wanted to [be] doing our best.

Several other students discussed these types of emotional displays and spoke about the importance of showing care and empathy toward a teacher whom they felt cared deeply about them. Several of them talked about Louise's father passing away during the school year and the effect it had on her, and the occasional moments of emotion she would show by crying in the classroom. At least three of the students stated that Louise informed them that she was able to deal with the difficulty of her father's death a little better by having them do well academically.

ically and behaviorally. The students mentioned “doing our best work” and “acting the way we are supposed to” as actions to show support for their teacher. In other words, they saw their teacher as a human being, one who has emotions just as they do, something that according to the students is rarely shown to students by their teachers.

Culturally connected caring as an ethic in teaching can include explicitly and implicitly showing affective, emotional, and nurturing behavior toward students, and as a result may have a positive influence on students’ desire to learn. Noddings wrote (1988), “it is obvious the children will work harder and do things—even odd things like adding fractions—for people they love and trust” (p. 10). Several students in the study made mention of going the extra mile for teachers who had shown various degrees of caring. Nicole, another of Vann Jones’ students, expressed a viewpoint that sheds insight into her characterization of care:

You know sometimes it’s the little things that a teacher can do that shows how much he cares. For example, if we miss the bus sometimes, Baba Jones, who lives all the way on the north side, will give us a ride home even though we live all the way on the south side. He doesn’t have to do those kinds of things. But when he does, it makes you want to do things for him in his class, like learning, giving your best effort. There are a lot of other teachers who wouldn’t even think about doing some of those things, that’s why they can’t get kids to learn.

A number of students spoke of the correlation that existed between teacher’s display of care and concern about them and the levels of effort they were willing to put forth for teachers. Nicole’s mention of “those kinds of little things” is important because it suggests the nature of holistic or comprehensive concern for students (Howard, 1998). In other words, attempts to convey concern for students outside of the context of the classroom may help to improve the nature of the teacher–student relationship in the classroom and potentially may translate into the achievement arena as well. The responses provided by the students refer to caring as a comprehensive concept that addresses various facets of students’ development. Gay (2000) referred to this type of caring as a “multidimensional process” that concerns itself with an overriding commitment to improving student performance in all aspects. Moreover, Gay (2000) asserted that caring within a culturally responsive context places

teachers in an ethical, emotional, and academic partnership with [students], a partnership anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the possibility of transcendence; ... an unshakable belief that marginalized students not only can but *will* improve their school achievement. (p. 52)

## VERBAL COMMUNICATION AND AFFIRMATION

In addition to the importance of culturally connected caring and family, community, and home characteristics, a number of the students talked about the various types of communication that their teachers used that contributed to their increased levels of engagement and achievement in school. In addition, the students asserted that the types of verbal communication shown by their teachers conveyed a sense of the care that they possessed about their students' academic welfare. However, a number of descriptions provided by several of the students mentioned the various levels of sternness that teachers used that contributed to their teaching effectiveness. Lashell, a fifth-grade student in Hazel's class, described one of the verbal characteristics that make her teacher effective, and she talked about what other teachers should do to show their care toward their students and their levels of achievement:

You need to be strict about having work done, you need to have them [the students] study and write down notes and stuff for tests. If she [the teacher] hollers, it just means she cares about us.

Several students mentioned "hollering" or "yelling" as an indicator of teacher caring, affirmation, and effective communication. A fourth-grade student in a different classroom made a similar comment when she described her teacher. She stated,

If you [a teacher] holler, it just means you care. But you can't holler for no reason at all. If we did something bad and she didn't holler I would think that something's wrong, and maybe she [doesn't] care [any] more.

The accounts described by the students seems to reveal their ability to interpret their teacher's behavior accurately and to recognize the teacher's desire for wanting the students to perform well academically and behaviorally. More important, the students seemed to believe that teachers who were not as emotionally and passionately concerned with their learning were teachers who "don't even care about us." The expression of passion was one of the primary teaching styles that students from Vann Jones's class stated made him an exceptional teacher. Several students talked about how upset he became when students were not focused on certain learning tasks and how they were compromising their own future potential. Kamaal, one of Jones' students, offered this sentiment:

When we're not taking school serious, Baba Jones will get real upset, and start getting on us about not messing up our future, and then he says we are too smart to be messing around. Sometimes he gets real angry, like we are his own kids. Just to see him like that (expressing anger) shows how much he cares. A lot of

teachers say they care but they don't really show it like Baba Jones does. He never says to us "I care about you guys" but his actions show it.

Most of the students' interview responses seemed to suggest that they were aware of why their teachers used stern approaches with them, and felt as if these approaches were for their own good. One fourth-grader noted,

Sometimes it makes me mad when she [the teacher] yells and I just don't care. Then when I think about it, I know that she is only doing it because she wants me to learn and she is helping me out.

Many of the students interviewed stated that yelling or strictness can be an indicator of a caring teacher, yet several of them believed that caring teachers do not make yelling an exclusive characteristic of their teaching. As one fifth-grader noted,

My teacher last year yelled at us all the time, but I don't think he cared about us, because all he did was yell, and he never said the good things that we did, only the bad things. I don't think he liked us.

Based on the students' responses, teachers who show a great deal of caring with their pedagogical practices make certain that they maintain a healthy balance of being firm and supportive. These findings are consistent with the research done by Kleinfeld (1975), which classified teachers who used this type of balance in their teaching practices as "warm demanders," wherein they are able to shift back and forth between stern and nurturing styles.

A number of the students in Vann Jones' classes mentioned that one of the critical features to his teaching style was the way he respected students. According to the students, a number of teachers get upset with students for myriad reasons; however, when the respect disappears, student responsiveness decreases dramatically. One student mentioned that "Baba Jones treats us like teenagers, not like first or second graders"; another claimed,

Baba Jones gets mad with us, but he never disrespects us, he explains why he is mad, what we did that made him upset, what he expected, and how we should do it the next time. After we deal with it (the problem) then we just move on.

Hazel, a self-described authoritarian, never became disrespectful toward her students with any of her pedagogical practices. Her statements were always followed with an explanation for why she chose to take various actions. In addition, she usually addressed her students as "Mr.," "Ms.," "Sir," or "Ma'am." Whereas many of

her students took exception to her domineering ways of communicating and teaching, they believed the benefits were worth the experience. As one student explained,

She's mean and she hollers a lot, but you learn. I know that I have learned a lot this year, especially in reading and math. And if you look at all of the kids who make the honor roll or honor society, they're mostly in her class, so I guess it's worth it [being in Hazel's class].

A student in Marilyn's second-grade class shared a similar view about his teacher when he was asked what he liked and disliked about the way she teaches. He explained,

What I don't like is that she's mean. She's mean cus' she yells, yells, and yells. She yells about real tiny stuff but I guess she cares cus' she says we come to school to get a education and stuff ... But she's a good teacher and it's good to be in her class ... And she helped me to learn how to read a lot. So I like her for that.

The students' responses to their teachers' methods of addressing or interacting with them revealed their ability to look beyond situations in which their teachers were "mean," or "yelling at us" to see the purpose of why teachers took such actions. In my observations of the students in these classrooms, it rarely appeared as though a student took a teacher's reprimand personally, or held a grudge for an extended period. Overall, the classroom observations appeared to confirm the students' responses about their teachers' stern communication styles. Most of the students seemed to accept these messages from their teachers, and used them as a motivation to do what was expected. More important, the students continually referred to these communication methods in the context of increased learning or achievement output. This correlation may suggest that students are more responsive to stern and affirming types of communication. The familiarity with these modes of interaction may suggest that some of the students experience them at home. Many African American students experience authoritarian parenting styles at home, wherein parents believe in strict adherence to rules and place a strong emphasis on discipline (Baumrind, 1971; Hill, 1995).

Many of the students seemed to understand that, when their teachers used strict approaches with them, it was because they wanted them to do their best. However, it is worth noting that African American students' perceptions of teacher-student interactions are not monolithic. Whereas demanding modes of communication may be appropriate for some students, they may not be effective for others. Several of the students stated how difficult it is to remember their teachers' concern and care for them as they demand their best work. Three of the students were not too fond of such approaches. A fifth-grade young girl discussed this while talking about her teacher:

I don't like how she yells at people if they get a question wrong. She can ask a question we [the students] don't understand then she yells and says "listen to the question, listen to the question!" Then she'll get mad. It's okay to forget, but she says we should already know the answer if we're paying attention. I can understand that, but does she have to yell? ... Sometimes I know the answer but I'm afraid to say it because she's going to scream at me [if the answer is wrong]. So I don't say anything.

The responses from students reveal the importance of caring relationships between teachers and students. More important, the students' descriptions of caring create more complex and comprehensive accounts of how caring can be shown by teachers. The interview data would also seem to suggest that, the closer care in the classroom resembles the manner in which care is displayed within home and community contexts, the more responsive students are. The overarching theme of verbal communication and affirmation offers an intriguing look into how teachers' modes of communication tie into students' engagement and academic performance.

## DISCUSSION

As stated earlier in the article, the findings generated from this study can in no way be viewed as the definitive voice of how African American students perceive effective teaching. The results can only be generalizable to the sample used. It is without question that a number of variables would alter how African American students perceive effective teaching. Variables such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, school environment, and teacher backgrounds may significantly alter student perceptions. It is also critical to restate that there is increasing diversity within African American student thought, behavior, and interpretations of school; thus the findings presented here are not intended to be prescriptive, but descriptive within a particular time and space for a selected number of students. However, these limitations should not diminish the insight that educators can take away from the descriptions provided by the participants in this study. The perceptions and interpretations of their teachers' pedagogy reveal critical insights into the dynamics of learning for African American students. One of the cogent characteristics that the students seemed to articulate was the importance of teachers grounding their pedagogy within a framework that is congruent with the students' cultural orientations. The students' responses would appear to validate the claims of literature on culturally responsive pedagogy that suggests that students' prospects for improved academic achievement are greatly enhanced when there is greater cultural continuity (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Though this study did not measure student achievement as a variable, the findings do suggest that students' levels of engagement, effort, and willingness to learn increased based on their teachers' ways of teaching. Future



research on students' viewpoints of school should address to what degrees, if any, students' academic achievement improves based on the types of teaching they describe as effective. This study did not examine high school students' descriptions of effective teaching. Given the degrees of maturity and complex insights that older students have of their school experience, their interpretations of teachers are desperately needed in the professional literature.

The data from student interviews offer suggestions for classroom practice and future research. Listed here are specific strategies that teachers can use based on the findings of this study.

1. Establishing Family and Community Environments. The students mentioned on repeated occasions their fondness for the family- and community-like environment in their classrooms. Strategies that can be used to encourage kindred relationships among students would be more cooperative learning situations, the elimination of homogeneous ability grouping, establishment of democratic principles, and the promotion of interdependence. In short, family-school partnerships seemed highly encouraged, and they are essential for promoting academic achievement among African American students. Knowledge and understanding of students' cultural backgrounds allow teachers to make explicit connections from students' lives, values, and experiences outside of the classroom to experience and knowledge inside the classroom.

2. Caring. Explicit and implicit displaying of the concern and care that teachers have for their students is critical. Teachers can demonstrate care in numerous ways, through positive reinforcement, challenging students to put forth their best effort and not accepting less, expression of high expectations, giving praise to student accomplishments, and taking time to find out about students' lives outside of the classroom. One of the more essential manifestations of care is through commitment to action on the part of the teacher who refuses to accept anything less than the students' personal best. A sincere commitment to student academic and social development may be the most important expression of concern and care.

3. Verbal affirmation. Language plays a quintessential role in the communicative process for African American students. The student data indicated sensitivity and understanding toward their ways of interacting, styles of expression, and modes of discourse. Equally important is the process of affirming students in communicative modes that are comprehensible to the students. Though these modes of dialogue may be firm and demanding, the students' responses suggest that they should not denigrate or belittle students' performance or potential.

## CONCLUSION

The incorporation of students' voices in the discussion on school reform is long overdue. Student viewpoints about what works and what does not work in schools

may offer new insights on school policy, educational research, and teacher practice. Thus, it is possible to suggest that much of what is done to help students who are labeled as "at-risk" may be altered in racial terms.

To effectively revise instructional strategies, teachers must be willing to create what Kohl (1999) referred to as "open education," where marginalized voices assume a significant role in the dialogue on how to create better educational opportunities for all students. Listening to students' voices may reward educators with insights into issues that may have been overlooked in the discussion on school reform. Soo-Hoo (1993) stated that "we listen to outside experts to inform us, and consequently we overlook the treasure in our very own backyards: our students" (p. 390). The findings from this study suggest that all teachers, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background, can meet the academic and social needs of African American students. In addition, the need to examine students' perspectives should go beyond African American students. Countless students from various ethnic groups continue to find themselves in school settings where they are not fully included in the learning process. Educators at all levels must be willing to "hear the footsteps in the dark." The continued disproportionate disenfranchisement of culturally diverse and low-income students represents voices that need to be heard, but are persistently ignored.

The results from this study offer a small but telling glimpse into African American students' perceptions of effective teaching. Listening to the voices of individuals who have been silenced must become an integral part of discussions and action to reform schools in a manner that grants all students an equitable opportunity for school success. This student-centered approach to research may unveil possibilities that could transform many of the modes of inquiry and practices that researchers and practitioners conceptualize as being best suited for marginalized groups. If students' perspectives into their learning environments offer critical insights for educators, not only can research and practice improve, but the academic and social empowerment of students may be greatly enhanced as well.

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